Alexander Key

Fortune Has Horns

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By

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CORCORAN was a gambler. Not with cards and a pair of ivories, or even horses, though Lord knows he dropped enough dough on all three. But you'd understand if you ever saw him squinting at a mountain—a mountain that might have gold in it. And you'd damned sure understand if you'd been with him that time on the Matamata…

My racket in those days was oil, and my trouble was politics. My company's leases had run out, and the new dictator wouldn't renew them. So the company had quietly decamped and left me with only a month's draft in my pocket and a ticket home. I didn't want to go home; I wanted to get roaring drunk.

And before I got drunk I knew I'd better write a long letter to Raquel and tell her it wasn't any use.

I knocked down the ticket for half price, went over to the Yankee Club and tried to mull through the Raquel Mackenna problem.

That was the worst of it. The Raquel problem wouldn't have seemed so bad at home; things are more democratic in the States. But Peru had never heard of the black days after '29, and the old families here in Lima, with four centuries of gold and silver platters behind them, would make a Long Island millionaire feel like a piker and look like a race tout. And don't let the name Mackenna fool you. Ever hear of Vicuña Mackenna? Never mind. The Mackennas fought with San Martin and Bolivar, and long before that, when they were burning witches in Salem, the Mackennas owned villas in Chile and mines in Ecuador.

So that was that. It wasn't any use. I was trying to find words to tell Raquel about it when little Corcoran came in. He ordered three whiskeys, downed them in three gulps, turned and clipped out:

"Any of you dirt-diggers know the Matamata country?"

Everybody looked blank, even old Phillips, the copper scout.

"It's a nice place to keep out of," I said. "I saw the mouth of it where it dumps into the Ucayali."

Corcoran swung on me. He was a little, bow-legged, sun-dried wisp of a man with a pouter-pigeon chest gained from twenty years in high altitudes. He had white eye-brows over very pale, very hard blue eyes. He flipped something that looked like a gold coin, stared at it, said: "I can't afford to go that way. Too far; too expensive. I'd have to go fifteen hundred miles down the Marañon, hit the Amazon, and come way back up the Ucayali. I want to cross the divide and tackle the headwaters from the *montaña* side."

"Sorry," I said. "I knew some guys went in there once. They never come out."

"One came out," said Corcoran. And then added: "What was left of him."

"He find anything?" asked Phillips.

"Oh, he'd panned some dust."

Phillips snorted. Everybody knew you could find the stuff in most of the east-slope streams; the trouble was to get it out and live to spend it. "You're crazy," Phillips said. "Why didn't you stick by that Urubamba business?"

"I did," rasped Corcoran. "And all I got was pretty vases. The government claimed 'em.

Artifacts. Now I'm trying the Matamata—but I've got to have a guide to locate it."

"If you want to die of curare," growled Phillips, "get in touch with Big Pedro Ramos. He piloted the Davidson expedi-tion, and be was with Hendricks and Vil-anti on the survey. You can't trust him, but he knows more about the *montaña* country than any man alive, and he's strong as an ox."

"Where'll I find him?"

"In Trujillo."

"Thanks."

CORCORAN turned slowly, looking at each one of us. He flipped that gold thing again and his pale eyes rest on me. Suddenly he sat down beside and started drumming on the table. He the inscrutable look of a poker player, I knew part of what was in his mind, He didn't know much about the jungles, and he wanted someone else along besides Ramos who did.

"Go on, don't pick on me," I told him. "I don't want to leave my hands in a Mangeroma cook pot."

He ignored that. "Hayes," he said slowly. "Two's company; three's a crowd. I need a crowd.

Let's see: you're twenty-nine, weigh about one-eighty, and you've got enough red Irish in you to see it through. Besides, you've lived on the Amazon side long enough to learn to eat monkey meat and keep your nose out of trouble, How much money can you raise in an hour?"

"About five hundred. It's all I've—" I stopped and stared at him. "Beat it! Leave me alone. That country's poison. I've got a letter to write and a lot of likker to drink."

"Yeah, so you have," he murmured drily. He leaned back, a queer, tight quirk to his mouth, and said nothing for about a minute. Then he began quietly: "Hayes, fifteen years ago I went through the same thing you're going through now. It's tough—and I had no prospects and no job. Sure, I know you're washed up here, and I know about Raquel. It's all over Lima."

I started to gulp something but he held up his hand. "Raquel's a good kid, and she's worth taking a lot of chances for. But you've got to have a hundred grand in your mitt before you can look Don Carlos Mackenna in the eye. All right. I know a place where you can pick up five times that much in a month."

He let that sink in, and went on slowly. "It'll take every penny we can scrape together, and we'll have to travel light and work fast. There's a rainy season coming. But we can outfit in Trujillo, sign up Ramos, and maybe be on our way in five days. It'll be bugs and malaria—but there's a fifty-fifty chance of winning."

He stood up. "The Trujillo plane leaves in an hour. Think it over."

He left abruptly.

I WASTED ten of those sixty minutes thinking of shrunken heads I'd seen for sale in Iquitos, and remembering how much cooked monkeys looked like boiled babies. And suddenly I was writing a hurried note to Raquel:

My darling :

Your Tony's off to the hinterlands to grab fortune by the horns. If you love me, wait for me. It may he six months. But when I come hack I'll have enough. No time to explain; must hurry to catch the Trujillo plane, but I'll he thinking of you every minute.

I got a boy to take it to Raquel's old Rosa, who had carried notes for us since Don Carlos had put me on the ineligible list, then I crammed a couple of duffle bags full of junk, tucked my cash into a money belt, and made it to the airport with nine seconds to spare.

Corcoran was waiting. "I figured you'd come," he said simply. "I've got tickets."

And when we were in the air he handed me. a letter. "Taxi driver brought it just before you came.

Fast work."

It was from Raquel, whose papa, I think, had always been sorry he'd allowed her to go to Wellesley.

My Tony:

What's happened? I'm frightened. No, I'm not. You can do it, Tony, and I'll spend all my allowance subsidizing the saints till you come back. Of course I'll wait, stupid; what else can a poor maid do in this man's country? But Tony, fortune has terribly sharp horns: he careful. Just come hack.

Just come back! If she knew where I was going she'd hide her lovely honey-blond head in a black mantilla and give me up. I buttoned the letter carefully in my breast pocket and tried to study Corcoran's map. Once I looked out of the window at that tortured, snow-capped world of granite on the right.

Some of it was four miles high, and we had three-hundred miles of it to cross on foot and mule-back.

After we crossed it there'd be the sweet job of locating the Matamata. Well, that was Big Pedro's worry.

We got our first kick in the pants when we grounded in Trujillo. Everywhere I looked I saw posters, and they were all offering a reward of ten thousand soles—more than a year's salary to me—for the carcass of one Pedro Ramos.

It seemed that Big Pedro was over-handy with a knife, and that he'd done a neat job of butchering a Trujillo official. When the constabulary went after him he'd done some more knife work, and now he was Peru's Number One bad man.

MY hopes, if you could have called them that, did a tailspin. Corcoran shrugged. He flipped that gold pocket piece of his, looked at it, and rasped:

"Hayes, take part of your money and buy some mules, packs and equipment.. Don't forget medicine and some trade junk. I'll take care of the main grub later. Then pick out an honest Quichua, if you can find one, and hit the road for Ruamachuco. If I'm not there when you get there, go on to Tocache and wait." And before I could ask questions he was gone.

It took me two days to round up the mules and a Quichua, and two more to get them started; and before I reached Ruamachuco the Quichua deserted with one of the mules. Corcoran wasn't in the town, so I got some warm clothes, another mule and another Indian, and started for Tocache, a good two hundred miles away. On that jaunt I wished I'd bought llamas instead of mules. I lost the new mule, half the equipment and all the trade goods in a mile-deep plunge off the old Inca trail. I went snow-blind on the high pass and rolled in agony for a week, thinking my eyeballs would burst; I got frost-bitten, and before it healed I was blistered on the hot plateau lower down and nearly strangled in a sand storm. And finally I reached Tocache.

Corcoran wasn't there. He appeared ex-actly twenty-seven days later, gaunt and thin-lipped, and with him was Big Pedro. Don't ask me how he did it; he's never told me. But Corcoran knows his mountain people as well as he knows placer mining. It cost him his last sol to find Ramos, and all he had when he arrived were two sorry mules, his gun and the clothes on his back, and this knife artist.

Big Pedro Ramos. Six feet of barrel-chested brawn, black-bearded and with a laugh that made the mountains ring. There was an old scar running from his hawk's beak to his ear, and it gave the left side of his face the look of a flawed copper casting. The mere sight of him frightened the Indians in Tocache. Even if they'd known there was a price on his head, they wduldn't have come near him.

I asked him if he thought he could find the Matamata.

He waved his huge hairy hand in a gesture that ignored the wild canyon of the Huallaga in front of us and dwarfed the fifty thousand square miles of grim mountains and black, pathless jungle beyond.

It was filled with head-hunters and hand-eaters, with yellow men and brown men who were devils with poison; and with poisonous springs and snakes and Upas trees, and it was the home of the *mato calado*— the silent death that can strike you suddenly without a breath or a sound; and leave your dead body without a scratch on it. It was the breeding place of a thousand unpleasant streams, and the Matamata was only one of them.

Big Pedro laughed. "But yes, senor, I can find it. Why not? I hear there is much gold on the Matamata!"

"I cut him in for a twenty percent split," Corcoran explained in English. "It was the only way to get him and make him stick." He spat. "We've already used up a third of our ftime—and there's a rainy sea-coming. Let's get going."

WE spent the rest of our money in Tocache buying dry grub and somo more trade goods and equipment, all at high price, and lost nearly a week getting it safely across the roaring Huallaga. My Indian was a staring, long-nosed Inca whom I called Boggle because I couldn't pronounce his real name; I thought would quit cold when he first saw Pedro, but Corcoran told him he could have the mules if he stayed with us till we got back. Boggle stuck, but all the way up that nightmare of rocks beyond the Huallaga, and down through the high slopes of *páramo* grass on the other side, Boggle watched Big Pedro like a rabbit would a wolf. After we dipped past the timber line and wandered for days in the rolling *montañas* while Ramos sought a landmark, Boggle had other things to worry him.

Below the two-mile level the mountain mist rose and we could see the awesome black-green jungle of eastern Peru and Brazil stretching interminably away at our feet. I was looking at the little wisps of steam rising from the hidden watercourses -when Big Pedro clouted Boggle out of his way and strode to the opening of a game

trail. Tufts of bright feathers dangled gaily from a string stretched across the opening.

Corcoran saw it, and being a western cordillera man, didn't understand. But big Pedro cursed and slashed at it with his machete. *"Por Dios!* The infidels; They would stop us here when there is no other way to go! The Matamata is two, three days to the north, and we must follow the lay of the land or it will be impossible to find it!" It was the first time I had seen him angry. He raved, for he was as eager to reach the Matamata as we were.

"What's the matter?" rasped Corcoran.

"It means keep out," I told him. "I'd just as soon face a few regiments of rifle-men as pass those feathers. In fact, I'd rather."

Corcoran booked his thumbs into his cartridge belt and stood with his bow legs well apart.

"Hinckle went this way," he said slowly. "I talked to him in Tocache last year."

Hinckle was the guy that I didn't think had come out. It was the first time Corcoran had mentioned his name.

"What happened to Hinckle?" I asked.

"He died," said Corcoran. "I might never have run across him if some Quichuas hadn't found him. He didn't have any hands. What do you think he bumped into down here? Jivaros? Antipas?"

"No. Mangeromas. They're hand-eaters. You know how to play your cards, don't you, Corcoran?"

"Yeah. If I'd told you before you might have thought twice about coming. I needed you." He looked at Big Pedro. "You sure there's no other possible way to get to that place in time?"

Ramos glared at him with his black beard bristling. *"Mil Diablos!* No—not if we would beat the rainy season! And we have no more time to lose now. But *Senores,* I would find it pleasanter to be decently executed in Trujillo."

CORCORAN grunted, and made the inevitable gesture when he was deciding something. He flipped that gold pocket piece and looked at it. He'd found it on his Urubamba trip, and I think he considered it a good luck charm. Every born gambler carries something like that. "Hayes," he rasped, "you're elected to take some trade goods down and leave 'em in an open spot somewhere."

"Very well, Little Corporal." The scheming devil knew I'd rather be dead here than broke in Lima. I took a few knives and some bright calico to the half-mile level where the bamboo begins to grow, and left them beside a spring. It was dark and silent in there, but I wasn't bothered. I came back and we waited until late the next afternoon.

Corcoran might shoot at a hundred-to—one chance, but he was no fool. We started downward with our guns ready, counting on night to hide us if our peace offering hadn't been accepted.

The offering still lay there. And on both sides of the spring were little sticks, each holding its gay leather warning. They'd undoubtedly seen us, they didn't like what they saw, and they were probably getting a reception committee ready for us right now. And no wonder. Too many Spanish had come down from the cordilleras, looking for gold, women, and whatever they could pick up. There were four centuries of bloody history behind those tufts of feathers.

Ramos took one look at them and jerked the thirsty mules away from the spring. "May be poisoned," he rumbled through his beard. "We go this way—and we go fast! We do not touch any water until tomorrow night." He slapped his mule with his machete and plunged into the undergrowth.

We followed as best we could, coaxing the balky animals over boulders and fallen timber and around bamboo tangles, and using our electric torches only a flicker at a time. It had been twilight at the spring, but ten steps off the trail it became black, opaque dark.

I remember praying then that Ramos would not go further down where the real jungle began.

You have to cut your way through that stuff, and sometimes you have to crawl. I didn't want to die where I could feel slimy things under my fingers. But Big Pedro led us downward, and it cost us Boggle and two of the mules.

PERHAPS the jungle demons know what happened to patient, long-nosed Boggle. I don't. It was nearly morning when it happened and the crazy howling monkeys were making my ears vibrate. I was close behind Ramos and we were hurrying, practically throwing ourselves through that strangling growth, slashing at it with our machetes and tearing at it with our hands. Fear does strange things to people. We didn't know we were tired, that we'd been driving ourselves like devils all night. And none of us even realized we were frightened. There was just the feeling of a great hand pressing behind us in the blackness, and each hour it pushed a little harder and we tried to go a little faster. Whenever we stopped for a few seconds it was not to rest, but to listen. And we heard only the silence, the hot, stifling silence of the darkest dark on earth, the silence that throbs in time with your heart-beats.

The last time we stopped I could dimly make out Big Pedro in front of me, and the red howlers were beginning to shatter that silence. It must have been nearly daylight. Boggle was behind me, and Corcoran was last in line. I thought I beard Boggle mumbling to his mule, and I was thinking this was no place to bring the fool beasts. Then I recognized Corcoran's rasping whisper.

"Where's Boggle?"

"He—he *was* between us," I told him. We looked at each other. Suddenly I motioned him to stay where he was, and l started back. I went at a crouch, counting my steps so I wouldn't get lost, and I was as quiet as a white man can be. The mule might have escaped my attention altogether if I hadn't been feeling my way carefully along; when I'd gone about a hundred paces to the rear I touched its furry rump.

It had fallen in a fern tangle and there was a six-foot poison-tipped hunting ar-row through its belly.

I didn't look for Boggle. I knew it wasn't any use. And I can't explain it—why they happened to get him and not the rest of us, and why I didn't run into trouble back there. The only thing I could do was to salvage that two-hundred-pound pack from the mule. I shouldn't have taken the time for it, but I heaved the thing to my shoulders and hurried back to Corcoran.

"I'll always remember Corcoran's comment then, for it showed the attitude with which he'd tackled the entire Matamata trip. "Shucks," he said. "We needed that mule." He meant it, and it was true.

We needed the mule more than we needed Boggle—if we expected to pack gold out over the mountains. I

think, hidden somewhere in that pouter-pigeon chest of his, is a heart as big as any man's; but we playing a close, terrible game now Corcoran had to watch every card.

W E divided the contents of the pack up among the other mules, and we did it on the move. Then we swept on with all the speed we possessed. At the moment our main fear was darts; you can't hear a blowgun, and half the time you don't know you've been hit. The things come in a shower and a scratch from one is enough. The arrows are more horrible but it takes a bit of maneuvering to shoot them, for a man has to sit down and stretch the bow with his feet.

A little while later we crashed through into daylight, a thin, blinding shaft of it that sliced the black waters of a stream. If there hadn't been the need for hurry I think Big Pedro would have picked a better place to cross. But he plunged straight ahead like a wild tapir, sending the spray flying, and we followed.

We lost the second mule there.

I was last this time, and my tired ani-mal decided to balk in mid-stream. I was jerking at him and cursing when Corcoran yelled and went splashing up the shallows in a frenzy. Pain like a red-hot poker ripped through my right leg; the water boiled around me and I heard Big Pedro bellowing. I thought it was arrows again.

"Dios mia! Piranhas! Hurry, you fool! Hurry!"

I dove shoreward faster than I've ever moved in my life, stark fear in my heart and the worst horror in creation gouging at my boots. My mule screamed behind me, and then I was clawing up the bank, Corcoran pulling me to safety while the water boiled and churned with fish. Little fish that clung to my clothes and feet. Cannibal fish. Piranhas. Fiends with snapping jaws and razor teeth that left holes as big as half-dollars in my boots when I knocked them off.

I kicked the horrid snapping things away and stood shaking behind a tree, staring at my screaming mule. It screamed like a man. For about five seconds I hated I that mule; it had nearly been the death of me. After that I was just sick. The mule reached shallow water and had only a few yards to go when it collapsed because it didn't have any legs left to carry it. Fish smothered it instantly, thousands of them, leaping high and fighting one another for a taste of blood.

"If I'd told you about this," I said to Corcoran, rubbing it in, "maybe you'd have thought twice about coming."

"It's part of the gamble," Corcoran rasped between tight lips. "We've still got two miles, and you and Ramos have strong backs. That's why I picked you. Let's get going. Those fish will keep any one from following us, and we ought to be in safe territory in a few hours."

I didn't say anything. This was hardly the beginning, and I knew it. Besides a mule, those fish had cost us half our remaining food supply and all our quinine.

WE reached the Matamata two days later—with one mule. The other simply dropped in its tracks. It may have been the *mata calado* that did it, as Ramos inferred fearfully, or the beast might have been scratched by a dart and we failed to notice it.

But we reached the Matamata, the three of us and one mule, and Big Pedro laughed for the first time in days.

"Mira Hola!" His great voice and sweeping hand was like Balboa showing us the Pacific. "I told you I would find it, *senores.* Behold—the Matamata!"

I looked down at the place and spat into it. A muddy, shallow stream that scrawled between wide clay banks and matted, towering harwoods. Farther down it deepened and disappeared in a black tangle. The place was beastly hot, with a steamy, stifling kind of heat that clamped on your lungs and made you gasp for breath. The still air sang with insects; mosquitoes, piums, flies—stinging, biting, crawling things that made life a torment. I tried to find our head nets, but they'd been lost with my mule.

Ramos went scrambling down the bank. He sprawled into the water, trembling hands clawing along the bottom with a kind of crazed eagerness. His hands came up and he stared stupidly at their contents. It was not the fine yellow gravel that I'd expected to see, that I'd been counting on seeing during every tortuous day since leaving Lima. It was not gravel or even sand. It was just gobs of sticky blue clay.

Clay! You don't find gold in clay.

Big Pedro roared oaths. He flung the stuff away, whirled, saw Corcoran, and came slowly up the bank. He was suddenly very light on his feet for so big a man and the scar running from his hawk's nose was livid. He thrust out his beard at Corcoran and in his hand was a knife. Probably the same knife he'd used so well in Trujillo.

"Canalla!" he muttered. "You told sweet lies to make me bring you here. I lead you through many deaths to a place of hell because I believed you. *Porque?"*

Corcoran did not move. "Put your knife away," he said.

"I will put it away when you show us gold. *Basta!* Find gold in that mud!"

Corcoran drilled him with his pale blue eyes. "You fool," he intoned slowly, "do you think I'd go to the trouble of saving the likes of you from an execution, and risk my own neck and everything I own if I didn't know it would be worth it?" He jerked his thumb to the left. "See that?"

I followed Big Pedro's eyes. Through a rift in the jungle I could see fragments of green foothills, and a patch of cool mountain beyond.

"The *montañas,"* said Corcoran. "Full of ore. This stream drains them. Go back down there, Ramos; take one of those hunks of clay on the bottom and cut it open with your pretty knife. See what you find."

Big Pedro's eyes widened. He leaped back into the water and I followed. The entire bottom was clay, all in loose, fist—size hunks formed by the water at flood stage. We tore open some of the balls and the place echoed with Big Pedro's roaring laugh.

"Sacred Mother! We've found the wealth of the Incal"

"That's what Hinckle found," said Corcoran. "It's a rare formation, but any placer man will tell you it happens sometimes."

In the center of each of those blue hunks of clay was a greasy wad of soft gray-yellow stuff. An amateur could tell what it was. An amateur could gather it with a flick of his wrist, and there was, enough here to keep him

busy for years.

But there was a catch in it, My eye traveled up the bank and found high water mark on the boles of the trees, When the rainy season came every drop of water on the nearby *montañas* would come this way, and the Matamata would spread out through the jungle in a ten-mile-wide flood.

"We've got just five weeks left before the rains come," I told Corcoran. "It's mighty little time to make a killing. I'm going to work."

WE all went to work. We were a little crazy about it at first—and who wouldn't be after fighting the worst mountains and the meanest jungle on earth, and finding more wealth than you could ever hope to get your hands on? And only a few weeks to salvage it, I cursed those days I'd spent waiting for Corcoran in Tocache and began working like a maniac. None of us ate that first afternoon, nor did we rest; we were three lunatics splashing after those gobs of blue clay, opening them in a frenzy and spooning their contents into little leather bags Corcoran had brought. Corcoran worked in swift silence; Ramos went about it in trembling clumsiness, making eager clucking sounds in his throat and sometimes roaring in delighted laughter when his knife exposed a yellow nugget.

Twilight stopped his laughter abruptly, and we all stood mute and suddenly sober at the ringing of a xylophone. Just a few high, staccato notes, coming from some indefinite direction miles away. An interval and it was answered from another quarter.

"What's that?" said Corcoran. "Sounded like a marimba."

"It's the original xylophone," I told him. "Those devils talk on them. My guess is that some news hound is telling all the maloccas about us."

"What are they—Mangeromas?"

"Maybe. Maybe Antipas or Huambizas; they're just as bad." Then I added: "Head specialists.

We'd better set out some peace offerings."

I did up some small bundles of beads and calico and we left them on the game trails on either side of the river. Jungle people are children and there was a chance the stuff might keep their minds off our heads for a while.

The next day we got some system into our work. Rarnos and I hauled the lumps out of the water and Corcoran crouched under the bank opening them. For a while we made good progress for Corcoran was fast enough to keep us both busy. I'd have given a lot for Boggle then, for we certainly needed a watchdog.

The leather bags grew heavier, and we grew thinner. At the first crack of dawn we were at it; we stayed at it until the moon went down; on the black nights we built a fire and worked by the light of it until we dropped. There were no piranhas in that water, but the insects hovering over it were as bad. They stung us all until we, were unrecognizable; they were in our food and our eyes; they blinded us—there were days when I stumbled back and forth with my armfuL' of clay, counting my steps because my lids were swollen shut. And always I seemed to hear the faint, devilish music of those xylophones. Sometimes at night I would spring out of a drugged sleep, sweating and shaking, thinking I'd heard their talk.

"Get a grip on yourself," Corcoran told me once. "Two weeks or so to go, and we haven't got half the stuff we ought to have."

The Matamata had turned him into a thin, red-eyed scarecrow. His hand on my shoulder was hot. "You've got fever," I said. "Malaria."

"I know it," he said. "You have it too. But there's no quinine."

WE had to keep going, and we did—with time out each day for chills and fever, which became steadily worse as we became weaker. Big Pedro didn't catch it and he worked on tire-lessly, cursing us because we couldn't keep up with him, and cursing the ringing xylophones that flayed our nerves raw. A crazed look had come over him, and he seldom laughed.

It was the thought of Raquel that drove me on, that kept my reason clear. During those final days she was in my mind every waking minute, a kind of mental stabilizer. "Fortune has terrible sharp horns,"

she'd written. "Be careful. Just come back…"

Dear child. I'd come back, and I'd bring her something other than yellow gold as a memento of the Matamata. That idea was born when t found the piece of spodumene.

It was good spodumene, milky-blue but flawless—the kind that is hard to find. It isn't worth much, but I didn't want this gift to have a monetary value. Cut and polished by a gem expert I could see it pendant at Raquel's throat, a live thing taking on all her soft coloring.

I found more pieces in among the clay; picking the best ones I thrust them in my money belt, and then forgot them under the press of other matters.

Food was one. It was all gone now, so we took turns hunting monkeys. And then one night, when the first rain came slashing down and put out our fire, and we lay in our hammocks too exhausted to even stretch a tarpaulin, Big Pedro an-nounced that a jaguar had put an end to our remaining mule.

We'd built a stout corral for that mule, we'd petted him and fed him, for he had to help carry our stuff over the mountains. The loss of him was tragedy.

I heard Corcoran swear softly. For awhile he didn't say anything, but I knew he was lying there fingering that good luck piece he'd found on the Urubamba, and probably wishing it were Aladdin's lamp.

Then I heard him slump to the ground and I guessed he was hefting those little leather bags that held our gold.

"Hayes," be whispered in a tight voice. "See—see how much of this stuff you think you can carry."

I fell down beside him, groping for the bags with unsteady hands. There were only six of them—and we'd planned on filling at least ten. Each weighed probably sixty pounds. Nearly two hundred thousand dollars' worth altogether, but it might just as well be so much sand unless we could pack it out.

I tried to lift a pair of them. Then I tried just one. I could get it off the ground, but I was so weak I couldn't have carried it fifty yards. I could have cried.

"It looks like a stalemate," I muttered. "What the devil are we going to do?"

"Do?" snarled Corcoran. "There's only one thing left to do. Make a damned dug-out and float down to the Amazon! It"s our only chance. *Verdad,* Rarnos?"

"Si, *Senor,"* the big fellow rumbled. "But certainly. It is the only thing left to do."

A hundred, maybe two hundred miles down the unexplored Matamata; several hundred more on the Ucayali before we might find a river steamer or a white man. No food. And worse, no quinine. I knew we couldn't do it and live.

And then I thought of Ramos. He could do it; he was strong and he didn't have malaria. It struck me suddenly that he'd been thinking of this all along. They wanted him for murder in Trujillo—but down on the Amazon he'd be free, and he'd have a fortune. All six bags of it. I never found a trace of that last mule, but I'm certain now that no jaguar ever killed it.

THE dugout was our only chance; we started work on it the next morning. A raft would have been easier, only there's very little wood in this country that floats, and none of it grew on the Matamata. Not even balsa or the giant bamboo.

Big Pedro felled a partly hollow tree on the bank and we went at it with fire and ax. It took us two weeks of mad, torturous labor to shape it and cut and burn it out, Two weeks that we'd hoped to spend filling our other bags, for the Matamata rose slowly at first. We rigged tarpaulins over the dugout so the fierce morning downpours wouldn't put out our fires. The fires had to char the wood before we could chip it, as this low country stuff is as hard as iron. And it had to be chipped thin so it would be light enough to float, safely.

The Matamata was lapping the top of its banks and beginning to overflow before we were ready.

The xylophones were tappy-bonging a new tune now, a furious, menacing sound that was like a blood cry. We knew we didn't have any time left. We hurriedly chopped paddles, threw our stuff into the dugout, and the second it was bobbing in the overflow we pushed off downstream.

Big Pedro's laugh came back to him then. *"Hola!* For luck, *Senores!* May we reach the great river top side up!"

Yeah! I glanced back at Corcoran sitting in the middle. He was beginning to shake with a chill and his drawn face was a death's head. I guess I looked as bad to him. Two hundred thousand dollars under the thwarts, and Big Pedro laughing. Corcoran glinted at me and spat.

I've often wondered what Big Pedro would have done if he hadn't hit rapids an hour later. He might have waited until the chills and fever finished us, or he might have used his knife. Anyhow, with the rapids in front of us, he must have seen his chance. In his way he was as big a gambler as Corcoran.

At the first sound of water roaring ahead we pulled to the bank and got out. Ramos went scouting downstream to see how the passage was. When he came back both Corcoran and I were flat on our soggy blankets, shaking our teeth loose with our usual late afternoon chills.

Big Pedro rubbed his beard; his eyes flicked from us to the dugout. *"Pobre hombres!"* he said, laughing suddenly. "If I took you with me you would make dugout too heavy in the bad places. *Adios amigos!* I leave you to do your shaking here!"

And with that he reached the dugout in a bound and was off in the flood, paddling furiously into the rapids.

IT happened so quickly, so unexpectedly, that all Corcoran and I could do was to claw to our knees and gape at him dazedly. It came at a time when we were utterly helpless, when neither of us could have drawn our guns if we'd tried. A jolt of tropical malaria takes you by the back and makes the very marrow rattle in your bones.

We could only slump on our blankets, shaking and watching. And we saw the whole show from the moment the paddle snapped in big Pedro's hands.

Whatever he was, the big fellow had nerve. There was no other paddle in that dugout, because I'd taken the second one to lean on when I got out. I could almost hear him roaring curses at the river while he inched forward with his hands on the gunwales, trying to shift his weight from side to side and keep the stern from whipping around. He couldn't do it. The dugout slithered into the white water and started to spin. For a moment spray smothered it when it struck a half submerged log. Then one end shot high into the air.

I caught a glimpse of little bags falling into the flood—little bags that had cost us months of deadly toil and every penny we could scrape together. Cold and white heat, bugs and poison, fever and starva-tion. We'd been through six hells to fill those bags, and now the Matamata was grinding them back into its devilish maw again. Just a glimpse when time seemed to stop, and then only the swirl where the dugout had smashed downward with Ramos beneath it.

Like a heavy, clumsy bird, wounded unto death, it rose and wallowed out of the water. It seemed to try to stay up, banging in the air for spaceless seconds. Then, still laboring, it fell…

That was the last we saw of either of them.

Of all the black, bitter hopelessness a man can feel. . . It was night when I was able to sit up.

Corcoran had found a box of waterproofed matches in his pocket and had built a fire. He was crouched beside it, fingering that good luck piece. The damned little gambler I knocked it out of his hand. "Don't let me see that confounded thing again! It's probably got an Inca curse on it. You've placed your last stinking bet."

He looked at me and said quietly, "We have to swallow the breaks as they come, kid. We've got our lives, and there's a machete, some matches and a few rounds of ammunition left between us. It still gives us a sporting chance."

"Chance! Chance for what?"

"There's Raquel," said Corcoran.

Yes, there was Raquel. She was all I could think about. But what was the use of even trying to get out of here if it meant returning to Lima like a whipped dog with only a few pieces of spodumene in my pocket?

I took the things out and toyed with them. Raquel would never have a chance to wear them. I hurled them into the night and heard them clatter on the rocks.

Luck can play queer tricks. The fire had died down, but suddenly an unearthly glow lit up the place. I heard Corcoran's sharp intake of breath. "Hayes, what in Heaven's name did you throw away just then?"

"Why, just—just some stones. Spodumene."

“Spodumene!” he cackled. “Spodumene! You’re some gem expert!” And he was scrambling over the rocks, picking up those little glowing things.

I was struck dumb at the sight of them and I couldn’t understand what had happened. Those stones fairly blazed. It was uncanny.

“Spodumene!” rasped Corcoran, and he blew up the fire and piled more wood on it. He crouched beside it, pawing at the stones, striking them, staring at them. “Spodumene! And they came out of that clay! Milky-blue. Flawless. Ha, and who-ever saw flawless spodumene this color! Shades of the Inca!”

“If it’s not spodumene, what is it?”

“Tiffanyite,” breathed Corcoran.

“And what of it?”

“Tiftanyite,” he repeated in a whisper. “Rarest gem on earth—the phosphorescent diamond.

Comes only from this region. Nothing like it in the world. Glow when they hit on something. Worth a year’s output at Kimberley. You could ransom Lima with these, kid!” I couldn’t say anything for awhile. Then I said:

“It’s fifty-fifty. Half are yours.”

He thrust them back at me. “They’re worth nothing unless we can get out with them. I picked on you because I thought you could do it in a pinch. You’ve got all the reason there is to reach Lima now.

How about it?”

But the rest of it is better forgotten. It’s a tale of ghosts who came out of the Inferno, of tottering skeletons who tore at raw flesh when their matches were gone; a tale of fever madness and poisoned water and bats that sucked our blood, of crafty-eyed brown men who fed us bitter cinchona bark for the chills when they could have had our heads. Why, I don’t know, except that you can never tell about human na-ture. Then the high passes and the mountain sickness again, and the blistering plateaus. And when we reached the hospi-tal in Trujillo an orderly cut off our remaining clothes with a pair of scissors and burned them. I had to fight to keep the money belt.

It was there that Raquel found me a month later. She was frantic and there were hollows in her cheeks. She’d run away from home to see me. “You idiot,” she wailed. “Why did you do it? Why? …”

“Why indeed?” I answered. “When they find out where you’ve gone, the Mackenna clan will raise the roof.”

“Let them,” she said. “I’ve no intention of going back.”